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FICTIONS OF TIME AND SPACE: FROM REALISM TO UTOPIA

IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE FOUR-GATED CITY*

Doris Lessing's most famous work remains *The Golden Notebook* (1962). Partly this is the legacy of its reception as a feminist landmark – a legacy not diminished by Lessing's own scepticism about such a reading. Partly, however, it is because *The Golden Notebook* constitutes a marker in twentieth-century fiction, as a writer previously known for her commitment to realism seemed to depart into more experimental modes; a fact not diminished – possibly, even, enhanced – by the nature of this departure being so unclear. As Tonya Krouse has described, a recognition of the novel's experimentalism was 'forestall[ed]' (115) by Lessing's 1971 Preface, which belatedly positioned it as a continuation of the work of Tolstoy and Stendhal; while critics such as Nick Bentley and Alice Ridout have continued to emphasise the novel's engagement with that legacy. Meanwhile, other readings have seen *The Golden Notebook* as possessing either a modernist or a postmodernist aesthetic, or both.¹ If the novel is a turning point, then, it is one that has led only into a tangle of paths, in which many of our critical terms become confused: realism jostling with modernism and postmodernism, as well as with non-realist genres such as science-fiction and fable. As Krouse notes, in the light of such debate and 'increasing scholarly interest in finding the common threads among literary works that span the twentieth century, Lessing's contribution to the canon of twentieth-century literature becomes much more apparent and the project of situating *The Golden Notebook* in that canon becomes much more urgent' (119).

This essay provides a new perspective on this problem by transforming it: arguing that *The Golden Notebook* was part of a longer transitional moment in Lessing's career that culminated in *The Four-Gated City* (1969). While the two texts have often been linked by critics, and the status of *The Four-Gated City* as the gateway to Lessing's subsequent work in

non-realism has been widely acknowledged, the development of a strongly spatial narrative mode in the novel has not been analysed. This spatial turn recalibrates the basic co-ordinates of the realist inheritance, with which *The Golden Notebook* had also struggled, and in doing so demands a cognitive and narratological understanding – something that distinguishes it from previous discussions of spatiality in Lessing's work, as well as from the discourses of space which flourished across the disciplines in the 1990s, though it speaks to the same globalization as triggered that critical turn. Lessing's treatment of spatiality in *The Four-Gated City* and after coincides with a desire to write a utopian collective, as is confirmed both by previously unstudied draft material for her next novel, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), and the published texts that followed. However, this attempt to succeed from the destructive globalism of the post-war era becomes deeply problematic through its concomitant treatment of history and time. This struggle in Lessing's writing can shed light on the interplay of space and time in the intertwined histories of realism and modernism in the twentieth century novel, as well as contributing to current debates about possible futures for the form.

LESSING AND ANTINOMIC REALISM

Prior to *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing's early output was dominated by realism, principally in her debut novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950) and in the first three volumes of the semi-autobiographic *Children of Violence* series; before her faith in its radical potential unravelled with her faith in left-wing politics.² Nevertheless, for all the experimentalism of *The Golden Notebook* it remains deeply engaged with the legacy of nineteenth-century realism, and in this section I will argue that the transitional status of both *The Golden Notebook* and *The Four-Gated City* is best explained with reference to that mode, particularly as it has been theorised

by Fredric Jameson in *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013). As a critical manoeuvre this might seem, at best, incautious: as Jed Esty recently put it, ‘semantic and scholastic debates gather around the word *realism* like moths drawn to a merciless flame’ (316), and Jameson’s account of this ‘diffuse and moving target’ (316) is just one amongst many. However, as will become clear, his analysis of nineteenth-century realism has a unique utility for a reading of Lessing, and the justification for proceeding as if the term had become temporarily flameproof must emerge through the readings that follow.

Jameson describes the emergence of realism from two different aspects of narrative: the *récit* (or tale), an older ‘storytelling impulse’ (15) possessed of ‘the more familiar tripartite system of past-present-future’ (25); and the *roman*, which occupies an ‘existential present’ (21), a ‘present of consciousness’ (24). Realism ‘is a consequence of the [unresolved] tension between these terms’, which in nineteenth-century art also becomes a tension between emotion that can be named – such as ‘love, hatred, anger, fear, disgust, pleasure, and so forth’ – and ‘affect’, which ‘somehow eludes language and its naming of things (and feelings)’ (29). For Jameson, such realism was linked to the emergence of the new bodily ‘sensorium’ (59) in the nineteenth century, and only had its authentically vital existence in that period, before changes to the capitalist mode of production and the parallel emergence of modernism and then postmodernism made its precarious antinomic balance impossible. Lessing’s attempts to come to terms with the legacy of nineteenth-century realism in *The Golden Notebook* and *The Four-Gated City* confirm this reading on many counts, only without appearing to accept either modernist or postmodernist routes as alternatives; and where the earlier work becomes trapped in its own diagnosis, the latter attempts to transform it.

The Golden Notebook can be read as still caught between Jameson’s antinomic poles. On the one hand it repeatedly comes to the epiphanic realisation that it needs to but cannot adequately render unnameable affect, the ‘raw unfinished quality in life’ (217), rooted in

embodiment, which the protagonist Anna Wulf's first novel had unknowingly travestied: whether it be 'the rough pulsing heat of a granite boulder' (71), or the 'tart clean smell' of fruit (345), or the knowledge that one's 'bones are moving easily under flesh' (533). On the other hand, the novel repeatedly comes to the equally epiphanic realisation that it lacks an adequate mode of narrative and naming which might harness and frame such embodiment: a 'particular kind of detachment [that] was something we needed very badly in this time' (520), a 'disinterested person' (534) who can stand back from phenomenological immersion. Analyses of the realism or otherwise of *The Golden Notebook* have tended to focus on the degree to which it describes 'the intellectual or moral climate' of its time in the manner of the novel of 'the middle of the last century' (10), as Lessing praises it in the Preface; while readings of the book in relation to modernism and postmodernism have probed how far the novel's innovative formal structure engages with or disrupts questions of subjectivity, meaning and language. The advantage of Jameson's account in this context is that it focuses attention on how the novel's form and figuration – whether seen as modernist, postmodernist, or both – is still driven by a desire to bring the *récit* and *roman* of a previous realism back into a vivifying relationship: a nostalgic or salvational desire that is replicated across each of the 'notebooks', whatever their other differences and relation. For instance, observe how each of the main notebooks ends: the black troubled by the discrepancy between narrative, in the form of a mechanistic film, and the affect-full experience in which it originated; the red, with an anecdote about the annihilating disjunction that occurs when an ideologically deluded and top-down historical narrative, addressed as if to 'History itself' (466), is actually addressed to a contingent individual; the yellow, in which the experiential intensity allowed by fiction has been boiled down to mechanistic plot summaries, the bones of narrative; and the blue, with a helpless immersion in the individual self, paired with a recognition of how this self is imbricated in a collective drama – 'the I, I, I, I ... were part of the logic of war' (513), 'I woke a person who had been changed

by the experience of being other people' (524) – though it is a recognition that cannot be communicated or sustained. The fact that Lessing's next novel, *Landlocked* (1965), returns to a relatively conventional third person realism, can be seen as tacit confirmation that she ultimately considered the overt experimentalism of *The Golden Notebook* a dead-end; while the persistent – indeed, increasingly frantic – prominence of the antinomic division in *Landlocked* confirms its continued importance to her development in this period.³ The novel repeatedly butts up against an increasingly loaded bodily affect: from 'the burning or warm, or glowing sensation' (9) of the sun on the protagonist's back on the first page, to the later 'feel [of] life running through' her lover's body as the only possible response to the mind's anguished 'knowing' (202-3). Once again, however, *récit* and *roman* cannot be brought into a generative relationship: the affair collapses, unmasked as a 'particular fever, in its aspect either of sickness or magic' (222), and the novel concludes – not unlike *The Golden Notebook* – with the dryly ironic parting of two female friends.

At first sight Lessing's next novel, *The Four-Gated City*, might seem to map quite straightforwardly to this progression: as the novel proceeds stolidly through 600 pages of realism, following the protagonist Martha Quest through 'Fifties and 'Sixties London, before breaking into a brief, science-fictional Appendix that describes the characters lives after a nuclear holocaust. However, while such an account would correctly position science-fiction as Lessing's ultimate answer to the impasse in which *The Golden Notebook* and *Landlocked* had become stuck, it would miss both the importance of spatiality to this generic shift, and the need which generates its discovery, as both are uncovered through the preceding 'realist' section.

As with the two novels that precede it, *The Four-Gated City* circles around the antinomy Jameson describes as underlying nineteenth-century realism; however, this time it takes form in the collision between different modes of narration. These consist of a first person (homodiegetic) narrative linked to a subjective experientialism, characterised by affect and

corresponding to Jameson's *roman*; and a third person (heterodiegetic) chiefly concerned with naming and narrating and corresponding to Jameson's *récit*. The following passage is a typical example:

Perhaps she should warn Jack? That thought, the housewife's thought, told her she was sinking, she was coming down. After all, she could not maintain it for long, could not stay where the air was cool and where it was ridiculous to think 'I must warn Jack'. Who am I to warn Jack? Responsibilities and commitments, she was sinking towards them, fast ... She had to go on dancing ... But Not Yet. With an effort, she shook, tightened, forced herself up, up through the quiet space and into the wave-length [...] even as she understood she had reached [...] a state of quiet and distance as far removed from the state of quiet known up till now as that state was from the humdrum of ordinary life, she was already sinking away from it. [...] She was sinking fast down, down: ahead there was a telephone box, a sentinel at the end of the street near a pub, now darkened. Yes, but remember the space you discovered today. It was gone, gone quite, not even a memory, and she sank down out of reach [...] (40; my ellipses in square brackets)

Franco Moretti has described free indirect discourse as an aspect of realism's complicity with bourgeois conservatism: a 'technique of socialization' (2013, 97) folding individual perspectives into the doxa of public opinion. However, in *The Four-Gated City* it invariably coincides with the kind of question that begins this extract, unsettling rather than embedding such a convergence by making FID a transitional point on the way to first person agency.⁴ The individual consciousness implicit in questioning – confirmed here by the immediate assignation of the question to Martha, and then by the shifts into the first and second person – also renders such FID sentences less 'unspeakable' than those theorised by Ann Banfield

(1982). Rather, it is as if the narrative wakes in them to an awareness of its own agency, a sense of how it might be different. Thus, after the initial question, there is a lapse into the third person, as the insurgent consciousness succumbs to the on-rolling plot, here explicitly linked to the theme of decline – and elsewhere the novel can continue for pages without a trace of such waking, as it yields to the customary matter of realism, ‘the humdrum of ordinary life’ correlated with the wider global history by which it is ‘affected’ (220). However, here the shift into the first person (‘Who am I ...?’) propels the novel back to awareness; before the third person takes over once more; before the free indirect ‘But Not Yet’ reawakens it again, diverting it towards the ‘state’ that is one possible synthesis of this dialectic, but which – as we shall see – is fundamentally unachievable in this form. The third person then reappears (‘It was gone ... and she sank’), swamping the spark into second person singular (‘remember the space you discovered’). In the next paragraph we learn that ‘Martha’ – the proper name like the final nail in her coffin of narration – has already forgotten this antinomic exchange; and though she acts on its substance, she does not know why (it is as if ‘hands took hold of her and turned her round’, 51). The exchange thus alters the course of the narrative – the character responds, acts – though the haphazardness of the process only advertises its fragility.

In *The Four-Gated City* the antinomic tension thus seems to be between a chronicling of personal histories within a bourgeois social order, in a manner commonly associated with nineteenth-century realism, and an empowered, experiential consciousness able to intervene in that somnambulist progression. This consciousness can be understood as a new incarnation of Jameson’s nineteenth-century ‘affect’, which had its origins in the bourgeois body, the new experience of embodied subjectivity. However, by 1969 this has become just another banal colony of capitalism. Part of the failure of both *The Golden Notebook* and *Landlocked* was that they had proceeded as if bodily love and romantic selfhood might still provide the key to a new future for both individual and novel – hence the centrality of the relationships between Anna

and Saul (and their doubles) in the former, and Martha and Thomas in the latter – but *The Four-Gated City* faces up to their limitation and falsity, and the bodies within it are either material facts to be survived along with everything else, or, in their amatory mode, instruments unfreighted with personal identity that can be used to access new states of being. Similarly, other key mediums for Jameson's nineteenth-century affect, such as food or domestic interiors, have become in *The Four-Gated City* commodities to be monitored and managed.

However, although this new affect is seemingly connected to Martha's consciousness, its emergence into agency and voice is complicated by what seems to be its protean and perversely unsingular nature. This is seen when Martha sets out to reclaim her past through acts of intense imaginative recall, in the section of the novel that comes closest to the affect that Jameson reads so finely in nineteenth-century realism: palimpsests of texture ('soaking dust', 'the grain of a curtain'), smell ('warm compost of scents', 'of the army, and hot fat, and floor polish'), light and colour ('a tree glowing orange', 'light on a strand of thatch'), sound ('an owl hooting', her parents' voices; 243-4). As one might expect given the older realism's preoccupation with the monad self, this experience is strongly linked to Martha's individuality – and yet its result is to trouble any conventional sense of what that might be, as the description of how 'she fought' to recover these scenes is immediately qualified by the question 'Who fought?', with the 'Who?' repeated twice more (244). What might seem like a fairly conventional existential self-interrogation becomes something stranger when the narrator imagines 'the sense of herself' as a woman with a different name; then as an old man, and then a young one; and finally as a horse, before concluding:

Who are you then? Why, me, of course, who else, horse, woman, man, or tree, a glittering faceted individuality of breathing green, here is the sense of me, nameless, recognizable only to me. Who, what?

This being moved in and out of the house on the kopje, every detail of every room clear, sharp, visible. But, let this person become Martha – she was swallowed in a wash of hot pain. Right then, fight it.

She fought. (245)

Note how the different narrative modes drive this attempt at recovery, negotiating a constantly shifting balance between third person and first person narration, the former concerned primarily with analytical framing and temporal progression, the latter loaded with the immediacy of embodied experience, a ‘breathing green ... sense’. However, for all that this affect is given form through first person narration, it is explicitly not vested in what one might call Martha’s first person identity, and the egocentric living out of these memories: which once successfully ‘fought’ also become, therefore, an exorcism of the realist Martha who had lived them through the *Children of Violence* novels which precede *The Four-Gated City*. Her identity becomes the accumulation of experience, but one that buckles the causal sequencing of the Bildungsroman – that variant of the realist novel at its height, and Lessing’s own label for the novel (‘Author’s Notes’, 667) – in seeming to both precede and exceed it. It thus manages to transcend all the historical varieties of Bildungsroman that Moretti describes: classical, in which the ‘satellites’ of social background are transformed into the significant ‘kernels’ of the hero’s experience; late, in which the latter have become traumatic accidents; and modernism, which concentrates on the meaningless contingencies of everyday life (1987, 231-5). Martha’s experiences, in contrast, are only traumatic in their (out-dated) bourgeois mode, and once properly realised are both significant and not.

A full answer as to the identity of this new affectual state still awaits us; but it cannot be provided without first recognising the novel’s eventual frustration with its own mode of generating it. As we have seen, it becomes associated in *The Four-Gated City* with shifts into

free indirect discourse and the first and second person: perhaps unsurprisingly, given how their apparent biographic closeness to a narrative agent can be a rough and ready means of increasing a sense of experiential intensity. However, the novel also becomes increasingly aware that these narrative modes cannot adequately render the new affect: indeed, as we saw in the quote above, the lapse into customary first person experience leads to its destruction ('swallowed in a wash of hot pain'). This accounts for the telling moment when the narration breaks from a long chronicling section to note: 'About a week before Dorothy slashed her wrists, Martha had seen, among the pictures that moved in her inner eye (very numerous these days), a scene of Dorothy ...' (336). There has been no mention of inner pictures until this point; and yet, apparently, they have been occurring frequently. So where have they been? It as if the novel, unable to locate a means of representing them, simply skipped them over. Similarly, while *The Four-Gated City* valorises dreams as breakthrough locations blending affect with analytic command, they remain largely undescribed: 'maps or signposts for a country which lay just beyond or alongside, or within the landscape they could see and touch' (392). They are still having to find their way through 'the lump of incomprehension which was Martha in her daylight or normal condition' (522), and which is *The Four-Gated City* almost in its entirety.

The novel's only option, therefore, seems to be a continued articulation by negatives; however, by its end the limits of this are clear. One of the climactic insights in the main body of the novel, the 'one thing' that Martha has learned, is 'that one simply had to go on, take one step after another: this process in itself held the keys' (611). This going on is the churning of antinomic narratorial positions; though despite the climactic optimism, it seems doomed to produce nothing but eddies in a larger stagnation:

'... this process which would, as it had in the past, be bound to lead her around to that point where – asking continuously, softly, under one's breath Where? What is it? How?

What's next? Where is the man or woman who ... she would find herself back with herself.' (611; ellipses in original)

We have been following such questions for the previous six hundred pages; and yet, still, here we are. In a reading focused on three exemplary modernists – Virginia Woolf, William James, and Bertrand Russell – Dora Zhang has traced how such demonstrative statements and pronouns conjure up 'the presence and reality of the pronoun's referent' (64) in an act of pointing which simultaneously acknowledges the limits of description. Zhang observes that 'the demonstrative injunction yields a counterintuitive understanding of what we could call the hyperrealism of Woolf's modernist aesthetics, her insistence on hewing more closely to the likeness of life. Extended to its limit, realist verisimilitude tends not toward greater descriptive detail but toward the austerity of ostension, this being in fact the most precise way of describing' (65). Something similar could be said of Lessing's despairing deictics in *The Four-Gated City*; however, the story does not end there for either Woolf or Lessing. *The Four-Gated City* shows this descriptive mode to be as much a frustrated impasse as a settled reconciliation with the limits of description (and realism), as it goes on to explore an alternative aesthetic that also suggests a different conception of the 'life' which underpins it.

LESSING'S SPATIAL TURN

The antinomy identified by Jameson in nineteenth-century realism was operative between the 'tripartite system of past-present-future' and the 'existential present'; in *The Four-Gated City* Lessing tries to replace that temporality with space. She does this partly in order to overcome the volatility that Jameson identifies in antinomic realism, whereby it is no sooner achieved

than it vanishes: ‘linguistic codification ... the nomination of an experience makes it visible at the very moment it transforms and reifies it’ (34). In the ideal version of *The Four-Gated City*, in contrast, a ‘naming of things (and feelings)’ would avoid this reification by connecting into a whole that transcends its codified parts, thereby reliably sustaining the transient ‘experience’. A good initial example of this difference can be seen in how they each treat the bodily sensorium, proposed by Jameson as the source of authentic realism. Whereas he opposes allegory to body-as-affect – they ‘repel one another and fail to mix’ (37) – Lessing sees the body as properly belonging to allegory, in that it is systemically chartable or codifiable; and, once charted, able to facilitate an affect which remains beyond it. Thus the body in *The Four-Gated City* can be understood as ‘a machine, reliable and safe for walking’, with ‘heart and daytime mind’ parcelled into this functional mapping (45); while the correct deployment of such bodies – for instance, through a cultivated exhaustion, or sex – turns them into ‘conductors and conduits’ (517) to a still uncoded realm. Such a charting of the body implies connections in space as much as – or more than – through time.

For a fuller understanding of how Lessing draws on spatiality in *The Four-Gated City*, it is helpful to refer to Richard Walsh’s recent hypothesis – made against the assumption, common to narratological discussions, that fictions both produce and refer to fictional worlds – that ‘the (fictional) narrative text is not in itself essentially narrative, though it primarily cues our faculty of narrative cognition, but rather the semiotic object of an interpretation in which narrative always functions interdependently with other modes of cognition, such as spatial modelling’ (461). Walsh describes how narrative cognition is ‘predicated upon the serial logic of temporal sequence’, whereas spatial cognition is predicated ‘upon the systemic logic of the spatial field’, with ‘each achiev[ing] conceptual integrity only by excluding the other’ (474); although because narrative cognition is primary, the role of spatial cognition ‘tends to be occasional, tentative and auxiliary’ (475). Lessing’s innovation in *The Four-Gated City* is the

attempted boosting of this ‘junior partner in a joint-stock enterprise with narrative sense-making’ (475) to a more prominent role. In retrospect, *The Golden Notebook* can be seen as attempting something similar, though its solution resembles more the idea of ‘spatial form’ described by Joseph Frank: whereby the fragments of narration – which are both the notebooks and their contents – are supposedly united reflexively by the reader upon concluding the text. This is reminiscent of Lessing’s influential rhetoric in the 1971 Preface, that its ‘central theme’ is concerned with ‘fragmentation’ leading to ‘unity’ (8, 7). However, as both the actuality and the reception of *The Golden Notebook* suggests – with its labyrinthine structure that sends us always back into the text – Frank’s theory only works in the abstract: where chopped up bits of narrative, excised of the temporality that necessarily inheres in them, can be imagined connecting like points in a diagram or map.⁵ *The Four-Gated City*, in contrast, accords with Walsh’s hypothesis: spatial cognition is generated by the semiotic object that is the text, alongside the narrative (that is, temporal) cognition which it also calls forth. This also accords with W. J. T. Mitchell’s reading of spatial form, whereby space and time in literature are not ‘antithetical modalities’, but bound in a relationship ‘of complex interaction, interdependence, and interpenetration’ (544). In focusing on the spatial as a cognitive and narratological function, this reading obviously differs from the more material and geographic understandings of space which underpinned the ‘spatial turn’ across literary theory in the 1990s, including in Jameson’s account of postmodernism; and from Susan Stanford Friedman’s ‘spatialization’, which conceptualizes the relationship between a novel’s plot and its ‘historical, literary, and psychic intertextualities’ (19). It also departs from previous treatments of spatiality in Lessing’s work, which have tended to focus on the thematic role played by images, symbols and motifs, or on the disparate spatial attitudes and demarcations that accompany colonialism.⁶

The Four-Gated City tries to locate structures within itself that might support a spatial cognition whose operation is coincident with authentic affect: that ‘state’ or ‘space’ which the

antinomic churning of narratorial positions could only throw off like sparks from an angle grinder. One such structure is the house where Martha lives with Mark, a businessman and writer; and with Linda, his estranged wife. The ‘correspondence between dwellings and interior states’ (113) that Roberta Rubenstein describes in Lessing’s writing has long been a subject for criticism, while scholars such as Betsy Draine have noted how the house in *The Four-Gated City* becomes ‘a symbol of Martha’s divided self’ (60). However, it is possible to read this particular house as symptomatic of a wider transition in Lessing’s narratological use of space and time, specific to this period, as she negotiates with the legacy of realism under the pressure of what increasingly seems to be a new historical moment. On occasion the house seems to be a bourgeois realist entity, of the sort that might have been found in the nineteenth century novel: a location for intersecting individuals, with a premium on their emotional lives. However, the main characters are also schematically distributed through it so as to explore their holistic relationship, which itself maps to Lessing’s own fictional development. Mark is the parallel of the realist Martha of the previous *Children* novels, who still threatens to envelop the Martha of *The Four-Gated City*: characterised by a feverish immersion in emotional relationships (‘sad, hot, embarrassed’ private thoughts, 388) and a helpless channelling of the contemporary political landscape. At one point we are told: ‘it was as if [Martha’s] past had become fused with Mark’s present. Almost, or as if Mark was herself, or she Mark’ (199). Linda, in contrast, the wife who has been terrorised by a psychiatric profession because of her telepathic talents, is the parallel to Martha’s future and the novel’s generic waking in the Appendix. She can read minds, see the future, access the affect-full world with ease – or at least, could until she was drugged and electrocuted. As Roxanne J. Fand has noted, Mark belongs in his study, the place of the rational mind, and Linda in the basement, the realm below, with Martha moving between them and the trio forming a fractured whole (134). In *The Golden Notebook* it was Anna Wulf who both probed the self, as does Linda, and interrogated newspaper clippings on a wall, as

does Mark: *The Four-Gated City* has begun to spatialise these functions. This accounts for the displacement of focus from Martha, in comparison to previous *Children* novels: a displacement more apparent than actual. The spatialization facilitates an exploration of Martha that can also acknowledge the communal constitution of a self that both the realist novel and capitalism had celebrated for its splendid autonomy.

Lessing's turn to spatial cognition is thus bound up with a newly collective conception of what is entailed by the attempt to 'realistically' describe an individual life; an aspect of *The Four-Gated City* that has also been explored by critics such as Molly Hite, Patricia Waugh and Sophia Barnes. The world is a systemic holism whose interdependent parts need to be properly 'named' – to use a terminology that is shared, significantly, by both Jameson and Anna Wulf – in order to produce an affect that is simultaneously individual and collective. This is why the novel could not rest content with the breakthroughs to authentic affect that were generated by the cycling of narrative modes: a switch into the first person could not communicate its communal synchronicity and oneness. In Lessing's new conception of the world, although the Mark/Martha/Linda trio might function in a way we can gloss as allegoric, it is also documentary: when Mark fulfils the same group function as Martha previously had, he as good as becomes the earlier version of her. What were previously the markers of individuality are now structural properties of a newly recognised holism which, as Hite has observed, 'destroys the coherence traditionally associated with individuality, and thus with realist notions of character' (25). Hate and love are not morally loaded individual states, 'not good or bad', but 'simply part of the world, like one of the colours of the rainbow', 'a sort of wavelength you can tune into' (69); while one of Martha's discoveries is that the 'jeering disliking enemy' which might seem a fundamental part of her, is actually 'in a lot of people', possibly 'everyone', possibly 'everyone of this particular culture' (541). This systemic imagining opens up an escape from the cul-de-sac Jameson identifies as realism's destination, based around the

‘comfort and inwardness’ of the ‘existential individual’ (2013: 5, 257) who Lessing confirms to be just another affect-imposter; while the future of both novel and society depend on the imagining of Jameson’s utopian ‘impossible collective totality’ (2013: 257). Indeed, *The Four-Gated City* retrospectively diagnoses nineteenth-century realism as a potentially utopian mode that lost its way, and tries to recuperate it through a recasting of the defining relationship between affect and narrative, or body and history – recognized by Jameson as inevitably antinomic – as a holistic symbiosis between individual and collective: a relationship which cannot be represented by customary narration, as we have seen, but which demands a spatial form.

The catalytic link between a newly utopian conception of human communality and Lessing’s turn to the spatial is seen more clearly in the incomplete draft for her next novel, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), which bears only a distant resemblance to the published text. A disparate group of characters are prompted to come together, in part by a mysterious figure who possesses an unaccountable knowledge of their circumstances. Some of the characters reflect on the organic holism of groups: for instance, each group ‘makes up a set of ideas, more or less cohesive ideas, but doubts [sic] and inhibitions and ideas that are outlawed have to make an appearance somewhere in the group, and the “oddball” [member] performs this function’ (35). Lessing’s plan seems to have been that the holistic collective (Part 1 is titled ‘The Friends Gather’) would map onto a structure both actual and symbolic: Part 2 is titled after ‘The Building’ they have been told to construct together by the mystery figure, though one of them also dreams of a building ‘made of a shining white stone’ that is ‘singing’ (80). A spatially distributed whole thus generates affect-full experience; the communal fulfils the individual, and vice-versa.

A similar entity constitutes the perfect alter-ego of *The Four-Gated City* and the avatar of Lessing’s spatial turn. It is glimpsed in the story that Mark writes with Martha’s assistance,

and which gives *The Four-Gated City* its name. A city is described in ‘a long, detailed, fantastic reconstruction which, by the time they had finished, was as good as a blueprint to build.’ (151). The turn to a spatialised, systemic imagining (‘blueprint’) is enabled by the generic change to the ‘fantastic’, to ‘legends ... fables ... fairy stories’. The ideal city is a sustainable fusion of third person charting and first person experience, of *récit* and *roman*, allegory and unnameable affect, collectivity and individuality: in which ‘every house in it had been planned’ and ‘every person in the city had a function and a place’, though ‘there was nothing static ... people could move up and into other functions, if they wished to’ (151). This new utopia is opposed to the atomised, militarised, capitalist city that accretes around and eventually destroys it: a city coincident – in both nature and encircling position – with the text that is *The Four-Gated City* itself. Finally, this ideal society that is also the ideal fiction is also the termination of historical time. The city’s structural harmony – its architecture and the holistic arrangement of people through it – demands a spatial cognition whose systemic logic is incommensurate with the temporal sequence involved in narrative cognition; though the evocation of movement within it (‘there was nothing static ... people could move up and into other functions’) readmits that temporality, even as it simultaneously confirms its a-temporality (everyone always has ‘a function and a place’, implying that any such movement is instantaneously – and so a-temporally – balanced in the network by reciprocal movement).

While this creation recalls Martha’s vision of a ‘noble city’ (21) in the first *Children of Violence* novel, *Martha Quest* (1952), the lack of schematic spatialization in that vision only confirms how far Lessing’s fiction has come. Similarly, the city’s holistic geometry aligns it with the ‘symbol of some kind, a circle perhaps, or a square’ (549) that Anna wishes for instead of words in the golden notebook within *The Golden Notebook*; though now Lessing has found a way to access such spatiality in narrative. The city finds a more exact analogue in the ‘little town’ described in an untitled poem from a folder labeled ‘early notes’, attached to the

manuscript for *Briefing*: ‘The little town whose name was sung / That fantasy in stone whose name was sung / from Balkh to Timbuctoo, [from] Iona to / [deleted]’. The poem concludes: ‘I don’t know how to tell that tale in words / Which is told without any words at all / In the structure of that garden on its dusty hill. / by that garden on its dusty hill in Spain’ (‘Notes’). Moorish Spain was celebrated by Lessing as a syncretic meeting point for East and West; but what this also makes clear is her understanding of the paradoxical nature of such narrativized structures, which would be formed within narrative but also transcend it.

THE PROBLEM OF TIME

But what is the connection between this incipient spatiality in the main, realist body of *The Four-Gated City*, and the flowering into science fiction in the Appendix, as well as in the non-realist novels which would follow for the next decade and a half? The key is again the relationship between space and time. In the Appendix we meet a new generation of children who are agential versions of the ideal city, in being repositories for a perfect collective affect that is pitted against the temporality of narrative. The children are united by telepathy and distinguished by ‘nothing you can measure or count, but [they] all feel it’ (660); they are also the telos of human evolution, and, as such, the termination of history. This pattern is effectively reversed ten years later in *Shikasta* (1979), the first novel in the five volume *Canopus in Argos* science fiction sequence. The Canopeans are like the telepathic children in being a utopian collective possessed of extrasensory powers; however, as they descend into the unbalanced world of human body, mind and history in the main body of the text – a counterpart to the realist body of *The Four-Gated City* – we only ever see them in their compromised state, equivalent to Martha’s in the earlier novel. Located beyond a climactic nuclear holocaust,

however, are strangely harmonious geometric cities, which, like the telepathic children of *The Four-Gated City*, signal an end to historical time as the novel itself ends, along with the concurrent triumph of a utopian collective distinguished by its spatialized synchronicity. The ease with which genres such as fable and science fiction allow for the manipulation of physical matter, and the apocalyptic ending of historical time, is one key reason for Lessing's turn to such genres, which is more often attributed to their typical subject matter and thematic concerns.⁷

This is the larger pattern that dominates Lessing's output through the decade following *The Four-Gated City*: utopia falteringly approached – but never quite reached – through a long prose narrative affiliated to history and realism; and completely but fleetingly figured via structures which suggest a perfect a-temporal holism. These litter her novels in a variety of guises from this point: from the geometric cities and gardens in *Shikasta* and the published version of *Briefing*; to the 'giant black egg of pockmarked iron' (189) at the end of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974); to the 'intricate structures and shapes' and 'patterns of matter' in their 'tenuous though strict dance' at the climax of *The Making of the Representative of Planet 8* (1982, 157-8); to the healing dance of mathematically ideal shapes in *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire* (1983).

However, while the spatial turn in *The Four-Gated City* seems to have been greeted by Lessing as a way out of the impasse in which *The Golden Notebook* had remained stuck, it is also deeply problematic. This is because the dampening or muting of narrative which accompanies it, invariably also means a muting of the historical processes that might connect our present situation to any future utopia: it is no coincidence that Lessing often turns to varieties of apocalypse at the end of these novels, as a way of magically overleaping the gap between quotidian history and spatialized end-state. Such a perspective can qualify, or add a chronological granularity to, the critical accounts which have focused on Lessing's intense

engagement with contemporary history throughout her writing, and her undoubted ability to reflect developments such as globalization and geopolitics.⁸ In retrospect, it also brings into focus the distinction between Lessing's ahistorical utopian affect – strongly influenced by her discovery of the Sufism of Idries Shah⁹ – and Jameson's historicized version of the same. The latter has been criticised precisely for not being this: Danielle Follett has argued that Jameson's 'affect' might be better understood as 'a placeholder for all possible terms on the existential/phenomenological side of the [antinomic] equation'; while Goran Blix has claimed that 'affect – emotion which exceeds any historically given taxonomy of passions – has always existed and its shadow existence could be discerned in texts throughout history'. However, when traced across the different volumes of Jameson's ongoing serial project, *The Poetics of Social Forms*, his 'existential' nineteenth-century affect can be seen as transforming into the temporal affects of High Modernism – the 'great high modernist thematics of time and temporality' (1992: 16) – which in our own historical moment require reorientation as a forward-facing utopian 'impulse' (2005); precisely in order to return history to a postmodernity he famously associated with a 'waning of affect', such that 'our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time' (1992: 16). In a recent afterword to a special edition of *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* on 'Worlding Realisms', Colleen Lye summarised how the edition's contributors were all 'intensely concerned with how literature is renewing our sense of temporal motion', in 'contrast' to what Carolyn Lesjack characterized as Jameson's "'postmodernism realism'" of space. However, Jameson had already described just such a renewal – the only complication for discussions of realism is that it comes in a volume devoted to 'the desire called utopia and other science-fictions'.

This convergence highlights how the question of 'realism's futures' – Lye's title, as well as Lessing's struggle – is also the question of utopia, such that a consideration of it might

validly include science-fiction; and as Lessing's fiction amply demonstrates, at the centre of all such questions is the relationship between space and time, which is both a narratological problem and one bound up with questions of an implicitly or explicitly global community and historical change. This insight might be amplified through other examples of twentieth-century fiction. For instance, we have already seen how Woolf and Lessing were similarly engaged with the limits of description. Previous critical comparisons of the two have generally been based – for understandable reasons – on their representation of, and status as, women;¹⁰ while the spatiality of Woolf work that has tended to attract most comment has been its more monumental formal aspects, as in the mirroring between the structure of *To The Lighthouse* (1927) and Lily's painting within it.¹¹ However, Woolf's prose is also notable for the way it constantly tries to weave the material world into a spatial figure: such as the 'invisible elastic net' that connects a scene for Lily, dancing 'in and about the branches of the pear tree' (24); or Septimus's rapturously dynamic vision of trees 'rising and falling' (20) in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), which contrasts with the deathly static 'curious pattern like a tree' (13) on the blinds of an important personage's car. Such phenomenologically rich patternings cohere out of the temporal flow of Woolf's fiction like islands of sand that are washed away almost as soon as they appear; and they exist in a constant tension with the need for, and the vicissitudes of, that temporality. Indeed, that the artistic correlate for Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), is the drama, as opposed to the static formalism of painting in *To The Lighthouse*, suggests that her engagement with space and time, both aesthetically and politically, remained more dynamically undetermined than did Lessing's; while the fact that Woolf's drama is focused on the twin themes of English history and a complex, currently existent community, underlines how spatiality in the twentieth century novel is keyed not just to imperialism and globalization, but also the desire for a utopian transformation of those processes.

The continuity implied here finds support in Joe Cleary's claim that 'modernism might now be viewed not as a liquidation but as an attempted sublation of realism into more spatially and cognitively expansive forms' (261); while its potential application to the future of the novel is suggested by his observation that, in the light of 'twenty-first century capitalist crisis', 'there are signs of resurgent interest in questions of literary totality that were once crucial to critical evaluations of realism and modernism alike' (268). Lessing's career – in both the change instituted by *The Four-Gated City* and the apocalyptic dead-end that eventually results from it – shows how such a totality, in which an aesthetic correspondent is found for our planetary situation, will require an ongoing antinomic engagement with history and narratological time. Perhaps just such an engagement is detected by Lye and Esty in their joint-authored framing essay to a special edition of *Modern Language Quarterly* on peripheral realisms, in which they discern '[o]ne formula for peripheral realism now' as being 'totalizing procedures strongly checked by the taboo on totality' (285); a formula which has the advantage of both arising from and speaking to 'the still-persisting impasse between racial/national particularisms and European universalism' (273) which both Woolf and Lessing were certainly aware of, but whose complications and distinctions the latter, at least, eventually overrides in her frustrated need to accelerate into a planetary collective, 'leapfrog[ging]', as Lye and Esty put it, 'the space between the local and the global' (287).

As Lessing reminds us, however, this space must also be temporal, historical – not least through the price she ends up paying for her refusal or desertion of this knowledge. David Sergeant has recently described the breach between an identification of the 'bad holism' (116) that is the realist present in *The Four-Gated City*, and the utopian holism of the future: a breach linked to Lessing's disillusionment with progressive politics prior to the revisionary period inaugurated by *The Golden Notebook*, and resulting in her repeated turn to apocalypse as a way of overleaping a gap she no longer believed history to be capable of bridging. While a proper

consideration of Lessing's intermittent return to a more traditional realism in the '80s and after, in novels such as *The Good Terrorist* (1985) and *The Sweetest Dream* (2001), lies beyond the scope of this essay, it can be posited as the eventual recognition of this new dead-end, and a stoic return to narratives now stripped of the spatial and utopian nexus inaugurated by *The Four-Gated City*, which after the Canopus novels is nowhere glimpsed in her work. Instead these later novels recount the perpetual repetition of human stupidity, the same old species flaws recurring in faintly different historical guises, punctuated by disaster: the stagnant churning of *The Four-Gated City*'s antinomic narratorial positions transposed onto the larger plain of an idiot history, signifying nothing. Perhaps this is the final question to take out of Lessing, to the novel of the present and our future – whether we call it realism or something else. All narratives are of course possessed of some form of temporality, but what *kind* of time do you make it? Which is also to say, what kind of spatialized relationship – what kind of collective – can it take us into?

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NOTES

¹ For *The Golden Notebook* as modernist and/or postmodernist see Draine 1980, Hite 1988, Krouse 2015, Wilkens 2016.

² This unravelling is well described by Sage 1983, Hite 1988 and Gąsiorek 1995.

³ Though see Gayle Greene's reading of *Landlocked* as itself constituting a 'break with realism' in its turn to a 'lyrical rather than a linear mode' (83).

⁴ In this sense it also works against Frances Ferguson's reading of FID, with reference to Austen's *Emma*, as a means of recognizing 'a communal contribution to individuals', with 'characters and society speaking the same language' (164, 170); and could be seen as reversing – in line with Lessing's revisionary project – the dynamic of FID in *Emma* as Daniel P. Gunn has described it, whereby it operates 'to draw figural speech and thought *into* the structure of narratorial discourse' (43; italics in original). As Angus Fletcher and John Monterosso's recently put it in their literary-cognitive analysis, there is clearly 'more than one possible function for FID' (84).

⁵ Roberta Rubinstein reads *The Golden Notebook* as caught between Lessing/Anna's discontent with 'linear form', and narratives as 'limited in the ways they can represent simultaneous events' (2015: 101): a tension which becomes clearer if 'linear' is subsumed into the more broadly temporal, and simultaneity into the systemic/spatial.

⁶ For the former see, for example, Rubenstein 1979, Singleton 1986, Kaplan 1988, Karl 1973, Perrakis 1992; and for the latter, Daymond 1986, Louw 2009 and Rosner 1999.

⁷ See, for example, Susan Watkins' account of Lessing's *Canopus* novels as 'postcolonial feminist science-fiction' that can 'imagine different technological legacies that have not been influenced by Western paradigms' and 'new ways of thinking identity' outside 'patriarchal, heterosexual and colonialist social and intellectual structures' (85).

⁸ See, for example, Collins 2010 and the essays collected in Brazil et al (2016).

⁹ Idries Shah's Sufism is a reworking of the mystical branch of Islam that claims pan-cultural origins and relevance; its impact on Lessing can hardly be underestimated. Indeed, the publication of Shah's first book, *The Sufis*, in 1964, is the most likely reason that *Landlocked* (1965) was not the decisive pivot point in her development: she had not yet fully assimilated the Sufi impact. Between *Landlocked* and *The Four-Gated City* Shah published six more

books. For Sufism and Lessing see Hardin 1977, Scott 1982, Fahim 1994, Galin 1997, Perrakis 1992.

¹⁰ For Woolf and Lessing see Rigney 1978, Saxton and Tobin 1994, Fand 1999, Kennedy-Epstein 2016,.

¹¹ See Abel 1989, 68-8 and Ellmann 2016, 105-6.